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A Nomadic War Machine in the Metropolis:

En/Countering London's 21st Century Housing Crisis with Focus E15

Paul Watt

Abstract

This paper builds upon Colin McFarlane's (2011) call in *City* for an 'assemblage urbanism' to supplement critical urbanism. It does so by mapping the spatio-political contours of London's 21st century housing crisis through the geophilosophical framework of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (2013) and Hardt and Negri's analysis of the metropolis in *Commonwealth* (2009). The paper examines the Focus E15 housing campaign based around a group of young mothers in the East London borough of Newham. In 2013 the mothers were living in the Focus E15 Foyer supported housing unit for young people in Newham, but they were subsequently threatened with eviction as a result of welfare cuts. After successfully contesting the mothers' own prospective expulsion from the city, the campaign shifted to the broader struggle for 'social housing not social cleansing'. The paper draws upon participant observation at campaign events and interviews with key members. The Focus E15 campaign has engaged in a series of actions which form a distinctive way of undertaking housing politics in London, a politics that can be understood using a Deleuzoguattarian framework. Several campaign actions, including temporary occupations, are analysed. It is argued that these actions have created 'smooth space' in a manner which is to an extent distinctive from many other London housing campaigns which are rooted in a more sedentary defensive approach based around the protection of existing homes and

communities – ‘our place’. It is such spatio-political creativity – operating as a ‘nomadic war machine’ – which has given rise to the high-profile reputation of the Focus E15 campaigners as inspirational young women who do not ‘know their place’.

Keywords: assemblage urbanism, Deleuze and Guattari, Hardt and Negri, Focus E15, housing crisis, London, smooth and striated space, nomadic war machine, encounters

Introduction

The temporary occupation of buildings and public spaces – squares, streets, plazas and parks – is one of the main ways that urban politics *takes place*. In the terminology of *A Thousand Plateaus* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2013, 444), occupiers are urban nomads; ‘the nomad distributes himself [sic.] in a smooth space: he occupies, inhabits, holds that space; that is his territorial principle’. By their actions, occupiers transform the striated space of the city; the grids, edges and straight lines of streetscapes and buildings become permeable as the nomads pore through the city’s cracks. It is the actions of denizens as nomadic occupiers which has characterised such prominent 21st century urban social movements as Occupy Wall Street in New York City, the 2011 occupation of Syntagma Square in Athens, and the Gezi Park Resistance in Istanbul (Harvey 2012; Stavrides 2012; Inceoglu 2015). Each of these occupations involved many thousands of people and they have had profound national and global significance; ‘Taksim Gezi Park became *the public space for Turkey*, both physically and symbolically’ (Inceoglu 2015, 542; original emphasis).

In these examples, Deleuzoguattarian 'striated space' – that which is delineated and monitored by the state through proscriptive barriers and rules ('do not enter', 'disperse by sunset') – *becomes* 'smooth space' – that which is seamless, open-ended and allows for rising up at any point, as in the sea or the desert. Striated 'space is counted in order to be occupied' whereas smooth 'space is occupied without being counted' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 421). It is the latter where encounters between alterities can be realised (Hardt and Negri 2009; Stavrides 2012) and a 'new urban commons' (Hodkinson, 2012, 500) of genuine public space and democracy becomes possible (Inceoglu 2015).

By contrast to the above spectacular actions, the urban activism that this paper examines – the Focus E15 housing campaign in East London – is far less well-known and is on a much smaller scale involving a few dozen rather than thousands of people. Nevertheless, an assemblage urbanist analysis of what such a small-scale campaign has *done* (and does) illustrates how striated space can be eroded and how nomadic smooth space can be opened up in a less immediately obvious but nevertheless *intense* manner. This campaign emerged out of a group of young mothers who were living at a supported housing unit – Focus E15 – in the East London borough of Newham. The mothers were threatened with eviction and faced the imminent prospect of leaving not only their neighbourhoods but the city *per se*. Through a series of high-profile direct actions, the mothers and their supporters successfully resisted this initial displacement threat and then went onto campaign for the housing and urban rights of ordinary Londoners, as encapsulated in their emblematic oft-cited slogan 'social housing not social cleansing' (Figure 1). The changing

of the campaign's name from its original 'Focus E15 Mothers' to 'Focus E15 campaign' reflects this widening scope.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Figure 1. Focus E15 Demonstration in East Ham, 5th July 2014

Photo © Paul Watt

As Adkins (2015, 147) suggests, one of the many distinctive features of *A Thousand Plateaus* is that it 'teems with numerous packs of all kinds'. Unlike Freud, Deleuze and Guattari (2013, 32) refuse to reduce the pack of wolves in the Wolf-Man's dream to a singular 'Oedipalized wolf or dog, the castrated-castrating daddy-wolf'. At the same time, whether there are five, six or seven wolves in the pack is immaterial. As Guattari (2015, 67, original emphasis) says, 'what is in question according to us is not the size of the tools, machines or equipment, but the *politics* of human assemblages as much at the scale of microscopic desires as of grand power formations'. The correct question is therefore not 'how many are in the pack/occupying the building?', but 'which intensities circulate through and are captured by the pack?' (Adkins 2015, 40). This paper is thus not concerned with numerical extensities ('how many are in the Focus E15 campaign?'), or with interpretation ('what does the campaign mean?'), but rather with asking the Deleuzoguattarian questions: 'what kind of experiment is it?' and 'what is it capable of?' (Adkins 2015, 100, 236).

In addressing these questions, the paper examines the spatial politics of the metropolis with reference to London's 21st century housing crisis, a crisis for which there is no obvious teleology. The following section examines 'the Deleuzian tradition of assemblage thinking'

(McFarlane 2011a, 205), focussing on various concepts embedded in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 2013) alongside Hardt and Negri's analysis of the metropolis in *Commonwealth* (2009). A brief account of the London housing crisis and its attendant multiplying political campaigns is then provided. Many of these housing campaigns emphasise protecting existing homes and communities – 'our place' – against the synergistic predatory forces of footloose global capital and neoliberalising states. Notwithstanding the importance of this metropolitan defensive *strategy*, it is argued that the Focus E15 campaign has *tactically* operated as a Deleuzoguattarian 'nomadic war machine'. *How* this has occurred is examined in detail in the bulk of the paper. The paper goes on to consider the *inspirational reputation* the Focus E15 campaign has gained for highlighting and combatting London's housing crisis.

The conclusion reflects on the '*politics of human assemblages*' (Guattari 2015, 67, original emphasis) and in so doing offers a comparison between the Focus E15 campaign and the celebrated Russian film *Leviathan* directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev (2014). Set in the remote Russian northwest, a place described by Zvyagintsev as being at 'the edge of the world',ⁱ the film perfectly captures David Harvey's 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003), a routine practice in 21st century London (Watt 2013; Hodgkinson and Essen 2015).

Assemblage urbanism and critical urbanism

Colin McFarlane's (2011a) benchmark paper on assemblage urbanism prompted a vigorous wide-ranging debate on 'Assemblage and Critical Urban Praxis' in *City* (see *inter alia* Brenner

et al. 2011; McFarlane 2011b; Russell et al. 2011). McFarlane (2011a) highlighted the potential of assemblage urbanism to add to the existing critical urbanist theoretical repertoire – capital accumulation, class and uneven development etc. – and in so doing enrich critical urbanism’s capacity to drill down into the micro-processes of capitalist urban inequality and its contestations. Like McFarlane (2011b, 376), this paper has ‘no unstated agenda of bypassing political economy’. Instead its purpose is to *supplement* rather than *supplant* critical urbanismⁱⁱ. This supplementing occurs via ‘Deleuzoguattarian geophilosophy’ (Bonta and Protevi 2004) and Hardt and Negri’s ‘metropolis’ (2009).

Deleuze and Guattari’s oeuvre is the subject of massive scholarly debate, not least by Hardt and Negri, ‘arguably the most famous ‘Deleuzians’ in contemporary political theory’ (Tampio 2009, 395).ⁱⁱⁱ I necessarily skirt over questions regarding the two pairs of authors’ differences and similarities, whilst at the same time being sympathetic to the view that Deleuze and Guattari do not occupy the same ‘revolutionary problematic’ (Lundy 2013) as Hardt and Negri (see Tampio 2009). Whatever political differences there might be, the authorial pairs both give ontological primacy to becoming over being. Fluidity and the ongoing creative production of assemblages are prioritised – as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 2013; also Guattari 2015) via nomadology, the war machine, deterritorialisation and lines of flight, and by Hardt and Negri (2004, 2009) in terms of encounters, the metropolis and the multitude. This approach allows urbanists to grasp how ‘unforeseen and contingent elements are in tension with the governance of striated space’, as McGillivray and Frew (2015, 7) illustrate in their Deleuzian-inspired analysis of mega-sporting events.

‘Assemblages’ are neither constructions formed out of pre-determined parts and nor are they simply random collections of parts. Instead ‘an assemblage is a whole of some sort that expresses some identity and claims a territory. [It...] is a becoming that brings elements together’ (Wise 2011, 91). These heterogeneous elements which constitute an emerging unity can be human, but are also often *material* in form, as in the nomadic invention of ‘the man-animal-weapon, man-horse-bow assemblage’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 470-71). As we see below, the over-arching ‘left assemblage’ (Tampio 2009) which is the Focus E15 campaign has emerged out of a multiplicity of mutating human-material assemblages.

The state is a hierarchical organisation which codifies territory via monopolistic physical and legalistic means, but one of its key aspects, according to Deleuze and Guattari (2013, 416), is ‘the perpetuation or conservation of power’. Thus, unlike chiefs in ‘primitive societies’, states endure since they conserve power over the long-term, and as part of this they devise and enact large-scale projects and public functions – hospitals, public housing and mega-events to name a few. They also divide populations along clear binary lines; ‘the State is what makes the distinction between governors and governed possible’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 418). That which is exterior to the state is what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the ‘war machine’ which is the product of nomads: ‘the organization of the war machine is directed against the State-form’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 418). However, as Deuchars (2011) notes, the war machine only literally takes war as its object in exceptional circumstances and thus ‘war’ is largely understood in metaphorical terms.

The key to understanding the nomadic war machine and the state is their different relationship to space: 'smooth space and striated space – nomad space and sedentary space – the space in which the war machine develops and the space instituted by the State apparatus – are not of the same nature' (Deleuze & Guattari (2013, 552). In the games' analogy from *A Thousand Plateaus*, striated space takes the form of chess whereby movement is prescribed within tight boundaries, whereas smooth space is akin to Go in which 'it is a question of arraying oneself in an open space, of holding space, of maintaining the possibility of springing up at any point: the movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 411-12). For the war machine, mobility is not narrowly goal-oriented along pre-defined tracks, but is rather a matter of nomadic wandering punctuated by sojourns whereby space is temporarily held. It is precisely this *temporary* holding of space which is central to that nomadic war machine called the Focus E15 campaign – as one of the campaigners herself Tweets, 'We could pop up anywhere'^{iv}.

In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri (2000) emphasise how global capital is a vector of deterritorialisation which smooths space by cutting across the striations of state borders. As Keucheyan (2013, 91) comments, 'Empire is deterritorialized in as much as the contemporary forms of capital underpinning it are mobile'. Indeed the view that capital is the *primary* smoothing agent features in other studies which are in awe of capital's spatial powers, as seen in Erturk et al's. (2010) comparison of hedge funds to Deleuzoguattarian War Machines. What is less explored in Hardt and Negri's works is how the 'multitude' might also have the *capacity* to smooth space.

Leaving thorny questions regarding the multitude's sociological basis and emancipatory capacity aside (Tampio 2009; Keucheyan 2013; Lundy 2013), what is of greater relevance here is Hardt and Negri's discussion of the city: 'the metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the industrial working class' (2009, 25), i.e. the site of exploitation and domination, but also of prospective redemption (cf. Harvey 2012). It is in the city where encounters with alterity, the Other, can occur which have the transformative potential to *make something new*: 'the metropolis [...] is a place of unpredictable encounters among singularities, with not only those you do not know but also those who come from elsewhere, with different cultures, languages, knowledges, mentalities' (Hardt and Negri 2009, 252). Hardt and Negri go on to argue that such encounters are at their most politically generative – of novelty and the multitude itself – when they are *joyful*, a prominent feature of the Focus E15 campaign as explored below (see also Bradbury 2015).

McFarlane (2011a) draws heavily upon the Deleuzian strand of assemblage thinking, notably in relation to notions of becoming, encounters and materiality. He highlights three 'orientations' for 'assemblage urbanism': potentiality, agency and cosmopolitanism. 'Potentiality' refers to the intensity arising out of encounters with people and objects whereby new urban collectives, ideas and imaginations can emerge. As we discuss below, it is this re-imagining of urban life – around housing provision – that has occurred via the various 'encounters' that have forged Focus E15 as a collective Deleuzian war machine. For McFarlane (2011a, 222), the second orientation – agency – refers to how 'critical praxis' is not simply a social process, but occurs via the *interaction* between the social and the

material. 'Cosmopolitanism', the third orientation of assemblage urbanism, is not the all-too-easily commodified notion of 'being different', but rather inheres 'in the mobile relational sense of 'becoming together'' (McFarlane 2011a, 219). As we will see, it is this 'becoming together' which has been so crucial in the unfolding of the Focus E15 potentiality. Before discussing this further, we need to locate the campaign within London's contemporary housing crisis and its politics.

London's housing crisis and its activism

London is currently experiencing a profound housing crisis for which there is no clear end in sight. The central contradiction the crisis exemplifies – between a housing production and distribution system geared towards maximising exchange values and a deepening vacuum in terms of meeting use values – is increasingly obvious in London's streets, characterised as they are by the homeless eking out an existence in the shadows of gleaming new apartment blocks that have been sold off-plan and stand empty. This contradiction was highlighted by the Focus E15 campaign who held a 'solidarity sleep out' (*Newham Recorder* 2015) with the homeless in Stratford, one of Post-Olympics East London's epicentres for upmarket real estate investment (Watt and Bernstock 2016).

Another manifestation of the housing crisis is that ordinary Londoners' right to the city – their capacity to remain in the city and especially in uber-gentrifying areas with rapidly rising rents, house prices and land values – is being eroded. As the Introduction to the Special Feature suggests, this social cleansing is being driven by a combination of welfare austerity

and the demolition of council-built estates under the guise of regeneration, i.e. state-led gentrification (Watt 2013; Hodkinson and Essen 2015). As London's housing crisis deepens, it produces class polarisation and class politics of the '99% v. 1%' variety as the super rich over-accumulate huge amounts of residential space while low-income Londoners squeeze themselves into smaller and smaller units (Dorling 2014; Glucksberg, Special Feature). Such class polarisation and politics do not, however, primarily take occupational forms (e.g. manual workers v. professionals), but rather coalesce around Engels' 'housing question' (Engels 1988) and Harvey's 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003). Indeed the academic incapacity to conceive of class and its struggles *outside* a narrow occupational/employment aggregate approach is one that has dogged parts of the debate over London's class structure in *City* (Manley and Johnston 2014; Hamnett 2015). To the extent that such analyses are rooted in inconsistent statistical aggregates of dubious sociological credence^v, they are of limited use in understanding London's contemporary class politics which increasingly operate on the *housing terrain*, as Sarah Kwei (2014), one of the young Focus E15 campaigners, has perceptively written about. It is on this terrain that transformative connections, imaginings and *potentialities* have emerged – precisely those features which assemblage urbanism can reveal (McFarlane 2011a). In this vein, Cath, one of the working-class mothers who has played a key role in the Focus E15 campaign, presciently explains how London is changing.

'The way I see it, it seems like London is turning into a place that is just for purely rich people and investors, bankers, they are all coming into London ... and all working-class people are being pushed out, and like eventually it's going to turn into

like we will be living in the slums, we will be living in houses that are falling apart, that they are not getting anything done to them, because we are the poor people, we are the poor side, they are the rich side’.

As the Special Feature illustrates, London’s housing crisis has produced a plethora of campaign groups who highlight and combat its manifestations and causes. The mainstream media tend to discursively frame this crisis in generational terms – ‘Generation Rent’ – young people under 35 who are struggling to get onto the city’s ‘housing ladder’. However the city’s housing struggles are much broader than this, including direct action, anti-eviction groups, squatters and campaigns challenging the demolition of estates. In resisting evictions and social cleansing more broadly, many campaigns exemplify what Crookes (2011) calls ‘emplacement’. In other words, campaigners are defending their own and others’ existing homes and communities – our place – from the ravages of austerity urbanism (Peck 2012), privatisation and state-led gentrification. The dominant approach to urban space is thus protective, i.e. defending place/s from the coercive, avaricious actions of developers and their state allies.

Deepening the ‘right to stay put’ (Hartmann 1984) in the city is strategically justifiable given the wholesale neoliberal/austerity assault that London is facing. In theoretical terms, the emphasis on ‘staying put’ is underpinned by either explicit or implicit notions of ‘being’ – that a worthwhile essence rooted in combinations of place (‘home’, ‘community’, ‘East London’) and subjectivity (‘mother’, ‘working class’, ‘East Ender’) is under attack from the predatory demands of footloose global investors seeking safe havens to park their over-

accumulated capital. As such, 'being' mobilises defensively in terms of emplacement, for example by resisting evictions and displacement. Such a sedentary position can also be identified in the Focus E15 campaign itself, not least since it began by defending the right of young mothers and their children to stay in East London where their support networks are located. The campaign's emphases on home, support and care also have strong gender and mothering elements (Bradbury 2015), and it is unsurprising that it has a predominant, although by no means exclusive, female support base (see Figure 6). Nevertheless, many of the campaign's tactics hinge less upon sedentary notions of defending established space – our place – but rather on spatial mobility and *becoming*, as central to the work of both Deleuze and Guattari and Hardt and Negri.

The paper draws upon a range of methods including participant observation, in-depth interviews with campaigners^{vi}, documents and websites. Since summer 2014, the author has attended numerous events organised by the Focus E15 campaign including their regular weekly stall, campaign meetings, demonstrations, the Carpenters' estate occupation, as well as social gatherings. This participation has involved active support via handing out leaflets, engaging with passers-by and speaking at campaign meetings. Such ongoing academic/activist engagement has facilitated informal conversations both with campaigners and with East Londoners affected by the housing crisis; the latter have also been interviewed and their voices appear in the paper.

'It was quite random' – encounters in East London

The Focus E15 campaign emerged out of a group of young mothers who in the autumn of 2013 were living in the Focus E15 foyer in Stratford, Newham. At this time the foyer, which is part of the East Thames Housing Association (ETHA), was the largest of its kind in the UK with 210 units, mainly single-person flats. In addition to such temporary accommodation, the foyer offered various forms of support for the young people (aged 18-24) who lived there, for example in relation to training and employment. They were a mix of Black and Asian Minority Ethnic [BAME] and white East Londoners from disadvantaged working-class backgrounds; some were also vulnerable, for example as victims of domestic violence.

Several of the mothers lived with their young children in a mother-and-baby unit at Focus E15 while others had their own flats. Funding for the mothers was provided by the Supporting People budget (£41,000), but this funding stream was removed as a result of government cuts which were passed on to ETHA by Newham Council (The Guardian 2013). Consequently the mothers were issued with eviction notices. Cath describes her reaction:

‘Just pure panic, like when I got the eviction notice, because I suffer from quite bad depression, so when I got that I just sort of gave up. I thought “do you know what, if this is what is going to happen, what is the point of anything anymore?” It’s only because my Mum said to me, “look don’t feel like that, you can do something about it”, and then I wrote a letter to the council and then got all the other mums who were feeling the same, they just felt what is the point anymore. But we got the strength to get together, and then we decided to fight back and we didn’t stop, as soon as we saw a little bit of progress we thought, “we have got nothing to lose any

more, we are going to be sent away from our family let's just do it, let's just put everything into it", and we did'.

Cath's support from her Mum reflects long-standing East End matriarchal kinship structures (Young and Willmott 1957), and was also a major reason for her wanting to stay in the area. Following her initial shock, Cath began going door-to-door at the hostel and speaking with the other mothers. However when the mothers approached Newham Council for help, the response was less than hoped for. In addition to central government welfare cuts and restructuring, the Council had changed its allocation policy for council housing such that greater priority was given to those in paid work as well as ex-servicemen and women (The Guardian 2013; Watt and Bernstock 2016). In effect, the mothers fell into a new 'undeserving poor' category. They were told that if they could not find their own private rental housing in East London, the Council would rehouse them outside of London, as far away as Hastings, Birmingham and Manchester (The Guardian 2013).

The mothers, who were now operating as a collective, devised a petition and proceeded to collect signatures in the local Stratford area. It was whilst they were doing this that they came across a 'grouplet' of the Revolutionary Communist Group [RCG] who at the time held a semi-regular stall against welfare austerity in Stratford Broadway. The RCG is a Marxist-Leninist group with a strong anti-imperialist and anti-racist ethos, as indicated by its newspaper, *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!* (see Figure 1 above). In the 1980s, the RCG were central to the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group where they maintained a Non-Stop Picket for nearly four years outside the South African Embassy in Trafalgar Square calling for

the release of Nelson Mandela (Brown and Yaffe 2014). The initial meeting between the Focus E15 mothers and the RCG was 'random' as Laura explains.

'It was quite random, because we used to just go and sell our paper and do our petitioning wherever. So we were an East London based small grouplet, so we used to go to Dalston, go to Stratford, go to Hackney, go to wherever we felt. So it was one of those amazing chances of history that we happened to be in Stratford the day they happened to pass. We used to occasionally go to Stratford, it was very boring, we had a small table, a newspaper and a petition about the Bedroom Tax.^{vii} [...] One day in September 2013, four young women came past the stall and they had a hand-written petition and a letter to the council, and they told us about the hostel they were living in, and that they'd been given an eviction notice'.

It is this initial coming together on a densely populated, thus far un-gentrified East London street which formed the basis for one of the city's 'unpredictable encounters' (Hardt and Negri 2009, 252) in which two singularities with limited knowledge of each other's life-worlds – East London mothers and revolutionary communists – came together to forge something new. While the original impetus for the petition came from the mothers, the RCG helped to provide material resources and a certain campaigning know-how: 'they [the mothers] didn't have access to a printer, they didn't have access to any of the stuff that we could help them with, so we produced exactly their wording, but on a printed out petition and that sort of stuff' (Laura). This coming together in practical material ways (McFarlane 2011a) was important in helping to build trust between these two quite different

singularities. Two women from the RCG went to the hostel to meet the mothers. Martha, who is only a couple of years older than the mothers, experienced simultaneous feelings of identification and overload.

‘When we first met them at the hostel it was terrible, it was so bad because we were surrounded by wee [small] children and all mums who were just like ‘what the hell are we going to do?, we have got eviction notices, we are fucked basically’. I was just like ‘well they are the same age as me, some of them were younger than me’, it was very, very difficult. You know it brings it back to reality, if it was just adults sitting in that room, it’s different from when you have got kids running about doing their thing. It was not easy, it was ... I remember having the feeling of like, ‘oh this is such a problem like where do you start?’ You need to take a minute to think ‘right, what should we do, how can we help, how can we support them to take action?’ So that day I went and made a Facebook page and we arranged to have some press like a photographer and stuff come down that day, so they came and covered the story’.

Following the hostel meeting, the mothers went along to the RCG stall in Stratford and from then the latter morphed into the regular weekly Focus E15 stall, as discussed below.

A ‘turning point’ – going to see the Mayor

As Adkins (2015) discusses, in formulating the ‘war machine’, Deleuze and Guattari take inspiration from Heinrich von Kleist’s works including his novella *Michael Kohlhaas*.

Kohlhaas is a 16th century German horse dealer, 'one of the most upright and at the same time one of the most terrible men of his day' (von Kleist 1960, 3). He is swindled out of two horses by a Saxon nobleman, Junker von Tronka, and subsequently petitions the court of Saxony for compensation. During the early stage of the Focus E15 campaign, the campaigners operated *within* the processes and boundaries of state striated space, just as Kohlhaas initially did.

'Like every day ... we were *scared* that we would get a letter or a knock on the door, we didn't know if the bailiffs would come and remove us. We would go to the [Newham] Council and the housing association – we made a point of doing it twice a week – and every time we was asking 'when have we got to go?' and 'what happens next?' and we would never get an answer for any of the questions. We would even ask 'would the bailiffs come and take us, would they kick us out?' – 'oh we don't know, we don't know, it hasn't been discussed yet', that's *all* we would get'. (Cath)

Out of growing frustration at the lack of formal information and recognition, the campaigners decided to appeal *directly* to the Mayor of Newham, Sir Robin Wales, who they genuinely believed would help them. Michael Kohlhaas, the 'very model of a good citizen' (von Kleist 1960, 3), also made such a direct appeal. After the court at Saxony turned down his petition, he agreed that Lisbeth, his wife, should hand deliver the petition to the Elector of Saxony. However this resulted in Lisbeth's death at the hands of a state functionary and the shattering of Kohlhaas's hopes of redress. The Focus E15 mothers' hopes were also

shattered, even though their actions at this point had been relatively minor and not directed *against* the state.

‘We walked in [to the Mayor’s office] ... and by then we’d done a few street stalls and had made the *Newham Recorder*, but what we’d said was just about our hostel, it wasn’t about anything to do with the Council. The Mayor saw us and I introduced who we were and he said “I think it’s disgusting what you’re doing” ... and he’s our *Labour* Mayor [original emphasis]. And we was completely shocked and at that point we was still quite weak, we were a bit shaken up by him, when we got out of the meeting we were actually in tears, cuddling each other, “he’s our Mayor”’. (Cath)

The local state, in the personage of the Mayor, closed down any kind of right to the city for the young mothers. According to several interviewees, his response was ‘if you cannot afford to live in Newham, you cannot afford to live in Newham’. Social housing (which includes public ‘council’ housing) was not on the agenda, or at least not for them. As Cath indicates, this rejection was all the more hurtful since Robin Wales is a *Labour* mayor. As long-term East Enders, the mothers tended to trust the Labour Party, the traditional party of and *for* the working class, and also the political party rightly associated with providing the bulk of London’s council housing (see Introduction to the Special Feature; Watt 2006). **Their** meeting with the Mayor starkly revealed how tenuous public welfare provision currently is in London. The social housing element of the post-war Keynesian welfare state is now so rationed that is more or less inaccessible for many who need it, thus radically attenuating

Marshallian notions of social citizenship and associated rights (Dwyer 2000) since market provision of housing is the *de facto* only game in town (Special Feature Introduction).

It was the starkness of the rebuff – the pulling up of the castle drawbridge – that galvanised the campaigners into further action: ‘in a way that was a turning point, we just thought if that is how we are going to be treated then we are going to show them that we are worth more than that’ (Laura). The Focus E15 campaigners repeatedly tried to gain answers, but in each case the space they encountered was striated by exclusionary boundaries.

‘So from there we’ve decided we’re going to keep questioning the Mayor, and we’ve been blocked out of public meetings, manhandled by security, we’ve been literally forced away, we’ve had the police called on us *just* because we want to ask questions. At public meetings we were forced to wait until the end to speak when everybody’s gone, and then we’d get 30 seconds of ‘oh come to my surgery, come to my surgery’ and then he [Mayor] runs away. But when we try to book an appointment to a surgery we’re denied because we’re Focus E15 [laughs]’. (Cath)

Such official inaccessibility echoes that in Joseph Heller’s novel *Catch 22* (1963, 92) whereby Major Major Major Major instructs Sergeant Towser to only let people into see him when he’s *not* there: ‘From now on [...], I don’t want anyone to come in to see me while I’m here’.^{viii}

‘We just walked in’ – the war machine arrives

The death of his wife represents the turning point for Michael Kohlhaas in his search for justice – he subsequently gathers his band of supporters and attacks the Junker’s castle. Likewise the bluntness of the Mayor’s response and his subsequent inaccessibility prompted a shift in tactics by Focus E15. They embarked on a series of direct actions notable for both their high-profile visibility – on both social and mainstream media – and their capacity to ‘pop up’ and hold space within the cracks and interstices of official striated space with its manifold inside/outside, permitted/proscribed, speaker/listener binary distinctions. They became a nomadic war machine.

The first major action was an occupation in the front offices at the East Thames Housing Association [ETHA] building in Stratford in January 2014. Following a protest outside the offices, the women, along with children in buggies (push chairs), went inside: ‘it was excellent, we just walked in and they have a show flat, so we had a party in the show flat and we got press down’ (Martha). In Goffmanesque terms, the campaigners had walked straight into the ETHA ‘front region’ consisting of shiny corporate offices which were out-of-bounds since the mothers were relegated to the ETHA’s ‘back space’, i.e. the hostel with its draconian appearance (Goffman 1971). The show flat Martha mentions was a mock-up to illustrate the kind of accommodation that East Village residents would occupy as part of the 2012 Olympics housing ‘legacy’. The ETHA is one of two housing associations which forms part of Triathlon Homes which in turn runs the so-called ‘affordable housing’ element at the East Village, the converted Athletes’ Village (Bernstock 2014). The audacious occupation unfolded in a celebratory, carnivalesque manner as Martha explains (see Figure 2).

‘There was a party, it was a lot of fun, we had lots of cakes, lots of hats, balloons, everything so we just marched in and just immediately got to work and decorated it all. Everyone had little hats on, so yes it was excellent, it worked very, very well’.

(Martha)

INSERT FIGURE 2

Figure 2. Occupation at East Thames Housing Association, 21st January 2014

Photo © Focus E15

The decoration of the show flat involved a material transformation of what was already a temporary structure. It also turned a faux home (‘just for show’) into a momentary ‘real home’ – a space for a joyful encounter of laughter and togetherness. This ‘socio-material interaction’ (McFarlane 2011a) at the show flat contrasted with the routinised deprivations the mothers faced in their actual real homes in the hostel, homes which were being taken away from them (Belgrave 2014). Cath described living with her daughter in a cramped studio flat: ‘we decided that we would have a party for our children there, because we had all missed out on birthdays, Christmases, all sorts of things, because we was in this horrible little thing [flat], and we was always scared, so we just enjoyed ourselves for that day’. Despite its exuberant character, the occupation reinforced the mothers’ awareness of the gulf between their own denuded domestic circumstances and the spaciousness of the show flat. Cath was ‘really upset’ by this contrast.

‘They had an Olympic show flat that was absolutely beautiful and this is just a show flat and it was like four times bigger than our flats. It was beautiful, perfect home, perfect place for anyone and it was just sitting there for people to look at, in an office and like if they have got that many, they was boasting about them being in the East Village and how nice they are, and they called it affordable housing as well, and we was thinking, ‘why can’t we be put in somewhere like this, you have given us these eviction notices, you should rehouse us and not just other people. [The flats were] complete opposites, we was living in one room, we had a separate kitchen and bathroom, but you could touch the walls either side of the kitchen, our flats were kind of damp, we was infested with mice, fruit flies ... it just felt really claustrophobic’.

The show flat was on view but out of reach. This contrast reinforced the significance of the mothers wanting answers from the ETHA. In fact the ETHA manager *did* come down to speak to the campaigners. For once officials were listening and responding to them rather than the stone-walling they typically faced. Their actions accumulated power in the Spinozian sense ‘as capacity or ability, not domination’ (Adkins 2015, 161), that which underscores Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of becoming as a virtue: ‘I mean the ball was really in our court, we were completely in control and we were determined what we were doing, so when we were singing those songs we were really involved and especially when there is children there, so it’s good that we got this chat as well’ (Martha). In Deleuzoguattarian terms, their breach of the off-limits space of the ETHA front offices and show flat, coupled with the material transformation of the latter, formed an assemblage

with intensity and power, a nomadic war machine. The party atmosphere combined with the strong female and maternal presence wrong-footed the male security guards who were milling around: 'it's very difficult on their part because they can't just get a load of securities come and chuck out loads of mums and babies and the rest of us' (Martha).

Following this first successful occupation, the invigorated campaigners went to the nearby housing department offices of Newham Council: 'after we came out everyone was on a bit of a high and we said, "OK let's go to Bridge House", so we just did an impromptu march straight to Bridge House' (Laura). In this war-like 'march', as in similar actions, it was the pack and its mother-child-buggy assemblage combination which gave the women a sense of their own accumulating potency.

'I think that is another reason why this campaign got quite far because a very big visual is seeing a girl with a buggy and like us all, we all looked quite military with our buggies like big tanks or something. So yes I think that is something that made it a little bit more powerful'. (Cath)

Initially the campaigners struggled to gain entry because of security staff, but eventually they got inside, 'all of us and banners and children and buggies' (Laura). However their reception was a good deal frostier than at the ETHA since not only did no-one come to speak with them, but the security guards tried to evict them and called the police. Before the campaigners eventually left Bridge House as a result of the police presence, they had a crucial *encounter* with two mothers who were being sent to Birmingham that day, an

encounter that indelibly confirmed the reality of social cleansing for others as well as themselves.

‘They were homeless with their bags and everything, one had a really tiny baby that was only a few weeks old, and they, as we was chanting they was crying, so we went over and spoke to them. The council didn’t give them any emotional support ... and we asked them what their situation was, and both of them were being sent to Birmingham, they [council] paid for a removal van and a taxi to take them away on that day, and so we was saying this is evidence right here. That was when we started doing it for everyone, because we really felt how upset they was, because we were in the same situation, we knew that would be us next if we didn’t carry on’. (Cath)

Even in the relatively brief time the campaigners were in the housing offices, their potentiality was massively raised:

‘Cath confronted Jacob who was one of the council officials who dealt with them, who was very patronising and rude to them. They had a very tough time and it was just like the tables were reversed. Suddenly they’re in a situation of control. Cath was very brave and just told him what they thought of how they’d been treated.’
(Laura)

The power imbalance between vulnerable young mothers and intransigent council officials was reversed. The eventual *institutional recognition* of the campaign’s accumulated power

came when nearly all of the mothers were eventually rehoused in Newham with council financial assistance, albeit within the insecure and expensive private rental sector.

Throughout this early period, the campaign attracted considerable attention from the local *Newham Recorder* newspaper, as well as national journalists covering the impacts of welfare austerity, notably Kate Belgrave (2014) who filmed many of their early actions. This media interest ballooned during what was their most audacious action to date, the occupation of a block of flats at the Carpenters estate.

‘These people need homes – these homes need people’ – occupying the Carpenters estate

During September-October 2014, the campaign created an ‘open house’ social centre by a two-week occupation of an empty and boarded-up block of flats at the Carpenters estate in Stratford. This council estate has been subject to a long-running ‘regeneration’ programme by Newham Council since 2005. As Watt (2013) discusses, the entire estate was due to be bulldozed in order to create a new Stratford campus for University College London (UCL). This plan collapsed in May 2013, ostensibly for financial reasons.^{ix} Nevertheless Newham Council continued to decant tenants even though it lacked a development partner. By autumn 2014 the estate was becoming increasingly depopulated with many low-rise flats ‘tinned up’ (see Figure 3). The campaigners became aware of the estate and its emptied-out status in summer 2014 via encountering an ex-Carpenters’ resident who stopped by at their Stratford Broadway stall. Cath describes her bewilderment on first seeing the half-empty estate.

‘We were really upset with the fact that people are forced away and they are now left empty, like it’s been over seven years and these properties there is nobody in them. I thought it’s wrong, that people who want to come back to Carpenters Estate and people that need accommodation, why should someone be sent to Birmingham when there’s a house around the corner? It really doesn’t make sense at all’.

INSERT FIGURE 3

Figure 3. Decorated flats at the Carpenters estate, June 2014

Photo © Focus E15

The first action on the estate was in summer 2014. The campaigners decorated a low-rise block of boarded-up flats with blown-up photographs of Newham residents (*Newham Recorder* 2014a; see Figure 3). One of the campaigners used her artistic skills and contacts with artists who had done a similar project at the Haggerston council estate in Hackney which was decorated with residents’ photos prior to its eventual demolition. As they began putting the posters up, the campaigners met one of the Carpenters’ residents.

‘He said, ‘oh yeah great idea, but if you don't get them up onto the first floor windows they'll just come down tomorrow’. We went, “oh yeah we can't really reach them”. He said, “don't worry”, and then he went away and about 20 minutes later he came back with this massive ladder. Then we got them up to the next level, it was really good. Then we hung around all day and met a few people from the estate’.

(Laura)

On Sunday 21st September 2014, the campaigners held a party outside the same block of flats. This presaged their pre-planned opening up and occupation of the flats. The removal of the grill on the front of the window was a key transition moment in the shift away from the flats being sealed striated spaces, to their opening up and out as smooth space, a moment whose significance was not lost on the campaigners, as one said, 'I was really nervous when we broke into the flats and I was looking outside at all the people stood there when we lifted the grills off' (Figure 4). The prominent pair of green banners they hung outside the flats – 'these people need homes – these homes need people' perfectly captured a central contradiction of the housing crisis whereby dwellings lie empty while the bodies outside have no place to call home.

INSERT FIGURE 4

Figure 4. The Carpenters Estate, 21st September 2014: creating smooth space – opening the social centre

Photo © Paul Watt

As with the occupation at ETHA, the socio-materiality of the Carpenters' occupation was highly significant. The women were surprised at the flats' good condition, as can be seen in the campaign's own 'show flat' (Figure 5). In many ways it was the flats' material condition – *not* rundown – which confirmed, for the media and the hundreds of people who went through the centre, the disingenuousness of Newham Council's claim that the estate was 'not viable' (Newham Recorder 2014b). Furthermore the women made strenuous efforts to keep the flats clean. They wanted the occupation to be a convivial, welcoming 'open house'

and also one that did not alienate the local estate population: ‘when we had to leave, we went to incredible lengths not to leave a trace, to clean and scrub out the toilets, we spent the whole day cleaning that place up, hopefully to get it ready for the next person, but also to show that we weren’t the stereotype of “dirty squatters”’ (Eileen).

INSERT FIGURE 5

Figure 5: ‘Uninhabitable’ flat at the Carpenters open house occupation, October 2014

Photo © Paul Watt

The open house occupation became a hub for people concerned with London’s housing crisis from all over the city. They were visited by women from the New Era estate (who were near the start of their own campaign; see Beswick et al., Special Feature), as well as trade unionists and a daily throughput of journalists and well-wishers, including existing residents. The occupied flats became a space for the kind of cosmopolitan encounters that McFarlane (2011a) highlights, those which criss-cross existing identity fault-lines, as explained by Tom, a postgraduate student.

‘I think it’s been a very exciting place to be the last week and a bit because it’s not only in terms of the ... more traditional conception of it as a protest, but also as a space that is basically a lot of encounters that I think it will be quite remarkable in ways. As someone said yesterday ... he was sat here and he was a squatter of many years, not that we are squatting of course [laughs]. But he said that what amazed him was the fact that he couldn’t tell who exactly was who, and I think he was right in the sense that the narrative we get from the people like *Evening Standard*

[newspaper] and the Labour Councillors is that it [the campaign] has been hijacked by activists and that is all about denying political agency to working-class single mothers. But always what has been amazing is that it has brought together people from these incredibly different backgrounds. I mean I come from a very privileged educational background, and the kind of people I have spent my week with, and the ways in which we have kind of like affected each other and lived together has been, it's been really interesting, I mean very intense but for all the right reasons'.

During the Carpenters' occupation, mainstream media interest mushroomed especially following *The Guardian* newspaper article by Aditya Chakraborty (2014). The campaigners estimated that they gave over 100 media interviews in two weeks. Russell Brand (a famous English comedian) came down and filmed the event for his online *Trews* programme. As media attention grew, so Newham Council's position began to shift. A few days into the occupation, Andrew Baikie (Mayor of Newham's advisor) roundly denounced it as 'disappointing to see empty homes in the Carpenters Estate being occupied by agitators and hangers on. [...] It is clear that the wider needs of the people of Newham are being ignored for the sake of petty, expensive stunts' (*Newham Recorder* 2014b). By the end of the occupation, however, the Mayor issued this statement: 'the way both their landlord (ETHA) and the council initially dealt with the Foyer families was unacceptable, and for that I apologise' (Wales 2014). The open centre's smoothing of space, alongside the unprecedented publicity it gathered, fissured the local state's carapace. As Robin Wales' (2014) *Guardian* statement says, the Council's subsequent intention was to make up to 40

of the Carpenters' homes available for homeless people, and indeed some people did subsequently move into the estate's empty flats.

'I think we have won that space' – the weekly stall

As we have seen, the novelty of the Focus E15 campaign is its ability to 'pop up anywhere' and temporarily hold space. During the summer of 2014, the campaigners decided to leaflet in what is supposedly *public* space, i.e. a local park where the Mayor of Newham's annual show was being held. The corporeal presence of the Mayor of Newham presented an opportunity, as one campaigner describes.

'Robin Wales arrived so S... went up to him and started asking questions. We all then got escorted out of the ground and had to protest outside. We couldn't even have the banner up, they [security guards] said we had to put it on the floor. S... was manhandled by security out of the ground. She said to them 'it's public space', but she got told by security that it's not public space, it's different because the Mayor's show's on'.

Such impromptu smoothing of space is accompanied by a more regular albeit still temporary holding of space which takes the form of the weekly campaign stall in Stratford Broadway. This stall has been running every Saturday, 12.00-14.00, since autumn 2013. While it lacks the 24-hour, 7-days-a-week temporal continuity of the anti-apartheid Non-Stop Picket in the 1980s (Brown and Yaffe 2014) or the current Kotti & Co (2012) Gecekondu protest-house at

Kottbusser Tor in Berlin's Kreuzberg^x, the Focus E15 stall nevertheless operates in similar ways since it provides a point of spatial and symbolic continuity, a place where the campaigners can come together as well as meet others, notably East Londoners threatened with eviction and other housing activists.

'I mean it's really important because that's where local people can access the campaign. And the fact that it's regular we are finding different groups will say to someone, 'go down to the Focus E15 stall and maybe they can support you'. What we can do as a campaign is support anyone who wants to take action in some way. Yeah and make those networks and links across London which does feel like there is still that emerging housing movement in London, and that's still building, so we feel a part of that'. (Eileen)

The stall operates as a space for Hardt and Negri's 'joyful encounters' in which Londoners from across the city and from a wide range of social backgrounds come together (Figure 6). Many 'random connections' (McFarlane 2011a) occur between those suffering from housing distress and visiting journalists, playwrights, film-makers, students and academics. In addition to the routine handing out petitions and making speeches, more often than not the stall has a festive atmosphere including songs, Christmas carols and birthday celebrations involving generous helpings of cake. Unlike the majority of London housing meetings, the stall is also a space where children have a prominent presence, not only the mothers' children but also those of supporters and visitors.

INSERT FIGURE 6

Figure 6: Focus E15 stall in Stratford Broadway, November 2014

Photo © Paul Watt

Despite the often upbeat atmosphere, the stall bears constant witness to distressing stories of evictions, threatened or actual displacement from London, and dire housing conditions (overcrowding, damp, infestation, etc.). Many of the locals who attend the stall are from BAME and migrant backgrounds, which is in line with how such groups disproportionately face disadvantages including overcrowding in Post-Olympics' East London (Watt and Bernstock 2016). Observation at the stall suggests that visitors are listened to respectfully on the basis that their stories *matter*, which contrasts with their descriptions of insensitive treatment by some housing officials, although by no means all.

The stall is located on a busy street and is described by Martha as 'the backbone of everything that we do'. The socio-material assemblage of a small table with leaflets, voices and music from the PA system, multiple colourful banners, coupled with a lively, ever-shifting melange of adults and children make the stall a prominent local presence, and also quite distinct from the previous RCG 'boring' anti-Bedroom Tax stall. The Focus stall has an explicit spatial significance for the campaign, as Martha says: 'I think we have won that space, it's not easy to claim a space actually and you can get hassle'. The campaign had once been told to move on by 'fake police' (Police Community Support Officers), but they had stood their ground: 'we need to stay in that spot, we have won that, we have kind of got that space and it's really important, you know it's really important to kind of claim that and to have like a big sound system and things like that' (Martha). This exemplifies Deleuze and

Guattari's nomadic orientation towards the temporary holding of space. In the interview with Laura and Eileen, the open, democratic potential of the stall came to the fore.

Laura: 'I think exercising the right to demonstrate is really important, you know that's our space, we're allowed to be there, we're not doing anything wrong'.

Eileen: 'It is really important being there, and it is really important because you can't build anything just in meeting rooms or just on actions. You have to be where people are and that's where we hear stories, and that's where we meet people, and that's where people can come'.

The campaigners' appropriation of space has a strong *ethical* dimension; not simply 'their place', but an open space for others to attend. After listening to people who are experiencing housing-related hardships, the campaigners put their stories onto their blog at <http://focuse15.org/>. This online blog itself opens up cracks within local housing organisations, as told by Krista who lives in temporary accommodation in Welwyn Garden City, having been placed there by Newham Council. She and her three children live, cook, eat and sleep in a one room studio flat. Krista describes how she had originally been offered a property in Birmingham, but had turned it down.

'The condition was terrible, not suitable for my children at all, and then they [the council] forced me basically, they say if I don't take it they kick me out on the street with my children. So my friend she introduced me to Focus E15, they wrote about

my story about 4 o'clock in the evening, so they post it on Facebook. Thursday they called me from Newham early about 9 o'clock, and I was worried, I didn't know what they will say, but the lady was very nice to me, she said that they withdraw the offer because it is not suitable for my family, and I said to myself, 'that must be some connection with Focus, what they wrote on Facebook'. Without Focus E15 I would be in Birmingham already'.

'They come in a bunch' – the effects of the Focus E15 war machine

The Focus E15 campaign has gained considerable national media and academic attention in its short life, as seen in its routine invocation whenever the politics of London's housing crisis are referenced (Jackson 2014; Slater 2015), and also when UK leftist political strategies are being discussed more broadly (Chakraborty 2014; Lawson 2015). In relation to social media, Eileen describes how she set up a Twitter account: 'before the [Carpenters] open house we had about 300 followers, then the article came out in *The Guardian* (Chakraborty, 2014] and I was at work, and all day long the phone was going beep, beep, beep, all day long. It was incredible, and by the end of that week we had 7,000 followers'. The campaign has thus managed to acquire a reputation way beyond its East London base and also beyond the narrow parameters of formal politics.

The term which is most often used to describe the Focus E15 campaign among London's proliferating housing campaigners is 'inspirational'. In fact they won the Ron Todd/Inspiring Young People Award in 2015, and have had plays written about them including 'E15' (FYSA

Theatre 2015) and 'Land of the Three Towers' (You Should See the Other Guy 2016). These inspirational qualities were centre-stage at the post-occupation meeting held at the Docklands Community Centre on the Carpenters estate on 20th October 2014. This date was doubly significant since it was exactly one month after the occupation began and was also the anniversary of when the mums were due to leave the Focus E15 hostel. The atmosphere at this meeting was celebratory as indicated by the banner at the front: 'this is the beginning of the end of the housing crisis'. This gathering brought together over 100 housing and other political activists from across London, as well as current and former Carpenters' residents. Speakers were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the Focus E15 occupation.

'A big, big thank you to the Focus Mums. You brought life back to the estate'. (long-term female Carpenters resident).

'You are literally an inspiration, literally. Too often young women are silenced and marginalised'. (female RMT [trade union] member)

'What an inspiration you've been, that we can empower ourselves. The Labour [Party] is making no stand'. (male, Haringey Defend Council Housing).

'I would love to hear of a social centre in West Hendon, it would be fantastic'. (male, Our West Hendon).

Several speakers were critical of the Labour Party; that not only was it not doing enough to challenge the housing crisis in London, but that the actions of Labour-controlled councils, such as Newham, were making the housing crisis *worse* not better: 'Labour is supposed to support the working class but they don't' (female, Housing 4 All).

As Deleuze and Guattari (2013: 450) suggest, if a war machine arises, 'the response of the State against all that threatens to move beyond it is to striate space'. A sign of the Focus E15 campaign's effectiveness and capacity to open cracks in the apparently solid edifice of the neo-liberal state is how the local council and its associates have anxiously attempted to (re)striate space. This has involved trying to *disassemble* the various assemblages the campaign has put together, for example by attacking the material fabric of the occupied Carpenters' estate flat: 'they tried to sabotage it, so the water was turned off at one point and we actually saw council workers smashing the water pipes' (Laura). Another example of such breaking up of the human-physical campaign assemblages is the 'arrest' of the Focus E15 stall table on Saturday 5th December 2015 at the behest of Newham Council's Law Enforcement Officer. The offending table was subsequently bundled into a police van by a posse of officers. In each case, the attempted disassemblings (open house, Saturday stall) backfired: 'we had [Carpenters] residents coming up to us, 'you can come and use my toilet'' (Tom). Social media played a crucial role: 'if you've got the word out on Twitter that the water's gone from Focus E15 occupied house on the Carpenters, people were coming with litres and litres of water' (Laura). The week after the table's arrest saw one of the busiest Saturday stalls ever with supporters coming from Essex as well as from across London.

A more serious example of state re-striation of space relates to Bridge House, the offices in Newham where the homeless are processed. As we saw above, Focus E15 temporarily occupied Bridge House in January 2014, but since then they have been unable to gain entry as a group, as Laura explains.

‘... since then there's been complete lockdown. You now go to Bridge House, they have shutters down, I mean it's awful for people inside. The shutters are down so people can't even get daylight while they're waiting there. You have to embarrassingly and humiliatingly show your letter with your appointment date at the door, and someone then let's you in. There's a buzzer system and all that has definitely come about because of the pressure that the campaign has put on Bridge House to expose the practices’.

Even though the campaigners were prevented from entering Bridge House collectively, they are still able to gain access individually in order to support homeless people. The powerful nature of the campaign can be seen in the following extract from an interview with two women living in temporary accommodation in Welwyn Garden City, having been put there by London councils. The women spoke in admiring terms about Focus E15 and also how the *tone* of the officials changed after they knew they had been in contact with the campaign.

Samantha: ‘Bridge House is scared of Focus.

PW: Are they?

Krista: Yes they are.

Samantha: Seems like it.

Krista: I felt that straight away, after I was connected [to the campaign] then I know they [Bridge House] just didn't call me just like that and be nice to me, when before they was like 'OK this is it', they was so rude to me.

Samantha: It's because Focus they teach people their rights.

Krista: Yes exactly ... and plus they come in a bunch you know.

Samantha: Yes they intimidate them, and say 'what are you doing?'

Coming as a 'bunch' – a pack in Deleuzoguattarian terms – facilitates the sense of power, in terms of capacity, that Focus E15 has and as such disorients state officials. Later Krista contacted council officials and politicians both in East London and Welwyn on behalf of the homeless families in her block: 'I thought if Focus can do it, I can do it'. Indeed Focus E15 campaigners have gone on to play important roles in helping other housing campaigns to emerge, for example at the Sweets Way estate in the North London borough of Barnet (Ramsay 2015).

Conclusion

Focus E15's restless nomadism and occupational sojourns in East London have given rise to the high-profile reputation of the campaign as a group of young women who do not *know their place*. The campaign has also demonstrated an unerring capacity to discursively crystallise the political economic and social contradictions underpinning London's housing crisis – 'social housing not social cleansing', and 'these people need homes – these homes need people'.

Locating the campaign in macro-political terms is far from easy. Certainly unlike their parents, the young working-class women at the core of the Focus E15 campaign cannot access secure, genuinely affordable social *rental* housing (Watt 2006). This class/generational issue of the progressive neoliberal shredding of the public housing component of the post-war Keynesian welfare state, alongside more recent austerity urbanism, is central to the Focus E15 campaign. Nevertheless, the campaign does not 'represent' any singular identity or sociological variable, but instead inveigles class, place, gender (Jackson 2014), motherhood (Bradbury 2015), generation and race. The RCG's strong anti-racist stance means, for example, that xenophobic narratives linking social housing shortages to migration are strongly challenged.

Macro-political signifiers such as class, gender and race – 'molar aggregates' in Deleuzoguattarian terms – focus on representational issues and often miss the point, as Adkins (2015, 134) argues in relation to the French Left's blinkered views on the events of

May 1968. More significant for Deleuze and Guattari are micro-political movements – in our case those movements whereby Focus E15 developed from monadic mothers into a nomadic war machine. This has involved multiple *becomings* predicated on shifting human-material assemblages: from a fake show home to a temporary real home; from a disused ‘rundown’ block of flats to an open house; from a ‘boring’ anti-austerity stall, to a vibrant, joyful weekly ‘social housing not social cleansing’ stall. In each of these becomings, space is smoothed and new encounters emerge whereby genuine cosmopolitan interaction *takes place* (McFarlane 2011a). As Tom says of the Carpenters’ squatter, ‘he couldn’t tell who exactly was who’.

Indeed being unable to tell ‘who is who’ is exemplified in two further, less immediately overt campaign becomings. The first and most significant is the mothers and their relatives ‘becoming-activists’^{xi}. Prior to receiving their eviction notices, the mothers had limited interest or engagement in formal politics. However, as we have seen, the stark realisation that their sense of place, their home, was conditional on market forces – ‘if you cannot afford to live in Newham, you cannot afford to live in Newham’ – prompted them to question and to act against such social injustice and become-activists. Thus the neat binary between ‘agitators’ and ‘the people of Newham’ (*Newham Recorder*, 2014b), which the council and other critics try and use against the campaign, has collapsed (Bradbury 2015). The second becoming – whereby RCG and other activists have ‘become-mothers’ – is far less intense than the first, but occurs through campaigners routinely caring for the mothers’ children at the Saturday stall, at occupations and when the mothers themselves are speaking on podiums. This double-becoming represents a shift that blurs ‘fixed’ social

identities and boundaries (for example between 'East Londoners' and 'activists') including questions of 'who do they represent?'

Is this enough? At the end of Chapter 14 of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari famously warn that one must 'never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us' (2013, 581). In citing this, Russell et al. (2011, 581) emphasise that 'we must not fetishize movement for movement's sake'. Indeed we must never lose sight of how mobility is the *sine qua non* of deterritorializing global capital and as such the latter remains the arch-proponent of smooth space (Hardt and Negri 2000; Erturk et al. 2010). Furthermore, states can also 'utilize smooth spaces as a means of communication in the service of striated space' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 449) through, for example, the penetration by surveillance technology into mis-named 'private homes' and 'public space'. The contemporary neoliberal-state/finance-capital nexus will therefore employ smooth space alongside striated space to further its ends of domination and exploitation.

Let us now return to *Leviathan* (Zvyagintsev 2014). The film centres on the proposed demolition of a remote house belonging to Nikolay who lives there with his partner and son. Nikolay's house stands on the site of a land redevelopment deal, a public-private-partnership, which is being driven by Vadim, the local mayor. Nikolay hires Dmitry, a lawyer from Moscow, to fight his case. Dmitry naively operates within the boundaries of striated space on what he assumes is firm legal ground. His appeals to evidence and due process are however subverted by the court's venality and subservience to Vadim. The latter eventually takes Dmitry on a ride in his 4x4 to an out-of-town location. The established rules of the

game are eroded in a journey to a smooth space beyond the town's limits, a space where neat legal striations cease to hold sway. Suffice to say, things do not go well for Dmitry or for Nikolay. At the very end of the film the mayor is shown eating and drinking in a local restaurant: 'that'll teach him [Nikolay] to know his place'.

Neither smooth *nor* striated space provides any guarantee of being saved, as *Leviathan* shows all too clearly. Why is this relevant? The town in *Leviathan* and the borough of Newham are both governed by mayors. The Focus E15 campaigners are a group of young women who, just like Nikolay, do not know their place; they each enter striated spaces they aren't supposed to enter, ask questions they aren't allowed to ask, and do so in a manner which is insufficiently deferential. However Nikolay and Focus E15 operate on profoundly different spatio-political terrain. Nikolay lives in a remote, sparsely populated location, whereas Focus E15 operate within a metropolis where there is the *potential* for encounters to occur between profoundly different singularities. Perhaps most crucially, Nikolay's struggle, unlike that of Focus E15, is *not* that of the pack. The campaign's Spinozian sense of 'power as capacity' emerges from its collective multiplicity as a nomadic war machine – that they come as 'a bunch' – and in so doing open up smooth spaces where new political encounters and possibilities can occur. This potentiality actualises hope ('desire' – Deleuze and Guattari 2004) – that Nikolay's tragic fate will not befall the multitudinous Londoners who are subjected to austerity urbanism and accumulation by dispossession.

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Notes

ⁱ See Interview with Director (Zvyagintsev 2014).

ⁱⁱ In the terms suggested by Brenner et al. (2011), this paper falls within a 'weak-medium' rather than 'strong' version of assemblage urbanism.

ⁱⁱⁱ Compare Adkin's ethical reading of *A Thousand Plateaus* as 'perceptual semiotics' (2015), with Bonta and Protevi's (2004) geophilosophical political reading via way of complexity theory; see also Spencer's critique of 'Architectural Deleuzism' (2011).

^{iv} I am grateful to Janice (Focus E15) for allowing me to use this phrase from her Twitter account.

^v See Hamnett's (2015, 241) apposite comment regarding Manley and Johnston's 'puzzling' use of the term 'service class'.

^{vi} Interviews were undertaken with six campaigners, including five who have had both deep and consistent engagement with the campaign. Some interviewees are affiliated to the Revolutionary Communist Group [RCG] and some are not. As the paper details, although the RCG has played a key role in the formation and development of the Focus E15 campaign, the latter also draws on support from a diverse range of people, by no means all of whom have explicit political allegiances. See Bradbury (2015) for an insightful discussion of the relationship between the original mothers and the RCG.

^{vii} The Bedroom Tax (officially called the 'spare room subsidy') came into effect in April 2013 and negatively affects working-age Housing Benefit claimants who rent from a social housing landlord.

^{viii} A case of Mayor Mayor Mayor Mayor?

^{ix} Although impossible to prove, the residents' oppositional campaign, coupled with support from UCL academics and students, probably played some role in the failure of the estate 'regeneration' plan.

^x The Kotti & Co. (2012) protest-house has been running since May 2012 and is organised by tenants (many of whom are Turkish migrants) to challenge high rents and displacement in social housing in Kreuzberg; thanks to Anna Richter for alerting me to this campaign.

^{xi} I am grateful to Ayesha (Focus E15) for suggesting this point.

Figure 1. Focus E15 Demonstration in East Ham, 5th July 2014



Photo © Paul Watt

Figure 2. Occupation at East Thames Housing Association, 21st January 2014



Photo © Focus E15

Figure 3. Decorated flats at the Carpenters estate, June 2014

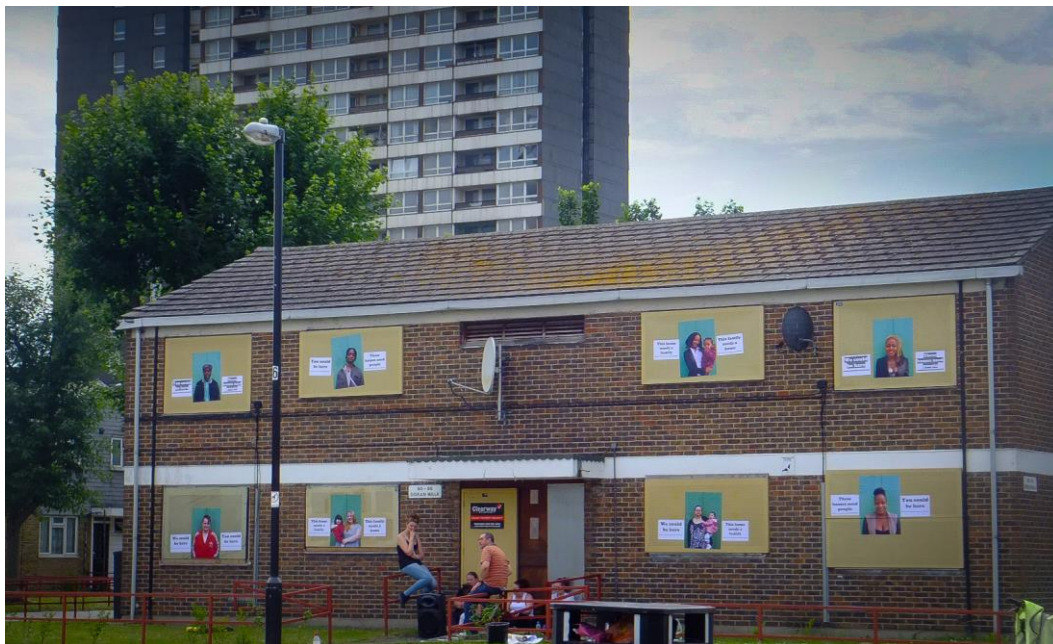


Photo © Focus E15

Figure 4. The Carpenters Estate, 21st September 2014: creating smooth space – opening the social centre



Photo © Paul Watt

Figure 5: 'Uninhabitable' flat at the Carpenters open house occupation, October 2014



Photo © Paul Watt